

HOPE IN THE DARKNESS

→ In our Christian calendar, today is very much a day of celebration. It's a day when we have the opportunity to stand with the crowds that lined the streets of the city of Jerusalem and cheered as Jesus came into the city, riding on a donkey. Palm branches were waved, coats were thrown on the floor to make a carpet on which the acclaimed one on the donkey could walk and cries of "Hosanna" could be heard ringing out that day.

.....So, it's perhaps fitting that the act of worship in which we share this morning also has that air of celebration. Joy because we worship Christ the King, our Saviour and Lord, but also joy as we share with Gideon in his baptism and with a number of other people whose journey of faith has brought them to a place where they wish to make a public commitment to God and his church by being received into the membership of the church here.

.....It's really good to celebrate the high points in our lives with those that we love and care about, because as many of us know, life isn't one long string of high points for most of us. It's perhaps no surprise therefore, that whenever there's an excuse for a party, we have a party, because there's plenty of stuff that comes our way in the course of our daily living that doesn't naturally give us cause to celebrate. That was certainly true for Jesus and his disciples in the days that followed the huge celebrations which we remember today.

.....Jesus had tried to tell his disciples what was going to happen to him. He had predicted the suffering and the death, but they couldn't or probably didn't really want to believe it. And you can imagine that as they entered the city of Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday they would have been convincing themselves that Jesus had got it all wrong. He was clearly popular! People were glad to see him. But how quickly things changed in the course of just a few days!

.....Life was turned completely on its head. The signs of victory became signs of defeat. Where there was light, now there was darkness. Where there was friendship, now there was betrayal. Where there had been optimism now there was despair. Everything that Jesus had said would happen, certainly had begun to happen! The tide was turning!

→ But, in the natural world we know, don't we, that the darkest part of the night is almost immediately before the dawn. When the darkness seems to be completely impenetrable, that's just when the first streaks of morning light appear in the sky. So, was that going to be true here for Jesus and the disciples? In these dark days when everything looked as if it was coming to an end, would the dawn appear? Would the light break through?

.....Well, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, even in the events of the final days of Jesus' life there is hope to be found and the material that you are studying in your home groups would encourage us to find three messages of hope within the events of the Holy Week that we enter today.

→ The first of those messages of hope is to be found in the truth that it's never too late to respond to the love of God expressed through the cross of Christ. In the passage of scripture that we heard, it was evident that many people were quick and content to mock Jesus as he hung on the cross. Maybe some of that was borne out of a sense of being let down by him. After all he had promised to pull down the Temple and build it again in three days! How would that happen now? And if he really was the Son of God then why on earth wasn't he doing something to save himself from this terrible situation?

.....Elsewhere in the gospels we discover that even one of the thieves who hung on crosses on either side of Jesus, spent time hurling insults at him too and challenged Jesus to save himself and them. But in the response of the second thief lies our first message of hope.

.....The second thief recognises that this man hanging next to him has done no wrong; that this man next to him is the Son of God; that this man next to him offers him real hope and so he says, "Remember me, Jesus, when you come into your kingdom!" You see, it's never too late to respond to the love that God has for you. Whatever course life may have taken up to now, whatever you may have thought about God up to now, it's never too late to allow your eyes to be opened and it's so wonderful today, as part of our time together in this act of worship to be celebrating with so many people who are making a public expression of their response to Christ through baptism and confirmation and membership of the church.

.....It's never too late to respond to God's love in Christ, but let's not use that as a reason for putting off making such a commitment. Living God's way is certainly not an easy choice, but there is so much to be gained from following Jesus and enjoying a relationship with him. Why wait? Why miss out on all that God has for you in the here and now?

→ Our second message of hope is to be found in the notion that God never abandons us. I imagine it must have been hard for the disciples to believe that when they journeyed through Holy Week with Jesus and eventually saw him hung on a cross. What about the last three years? Had they thrown their lives away for a lost cause? Had it all been a complete waste of time and energy? What would they do next? Where on earth was God now and how could he possibly still be in control when all this was happening?

.....In these darkest of days, it must surely have seemed to the disciples as though everything was over, their dreams and hopes had been permanently shattered. And for many of us, there may well have been times in the past or there may be times in the future when it seems as if we have been wasting our time following Jesus, because just when we need him most it can feel as if he has abandoned us. And according to Matthew, even Jesus, as he hung on the cross may have felt that same sense of abandonment as he cried out "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?"

.....But, is that really what happened and does that really ring true with what we find elsewhere in scripture? Jesus himself spoke of him and the Father being one and when Paul writes of the death of Christ he speaks of "God being in Christ,

reconciling us to him, making us his friends. So, even if Jesus did in any way have a sense of abandonment so that he might experience all that we experience, the hope is to be found in the notion that God was in fact, ever present.

.....God does not abandon us. Through the prophet Isaiah he promised his people that “when you pass through deep waters, I will be with you!” That promise was for the disciples who watched Jesus die and who themselves felt abandoned and it’s a promise for us today which reminds us that however dark our days and however alone we may feel in terms of human companionship and support we are never without the presence of God himself. He is always there in our difficult moments and in our times of celebration.

→ And the third and final message of hope for us to glean from this passage today comes again from those apparent words of abandonment uttered by Jesus on the cross. Many of you will be aware that these words come from the psalms. There are many psalms that speak of feelings of separation from God, but Jesus chose to quote from Psalm 22 which is a psalm that speaks of so much more than just that!

.....If you take the time to read Psalm 22 you will find that it is described as a “cry of anguish and a psalm of praise” and as you read it you are taken on that journey through despair to hopeful looking ahead into the future. The latter part of the psalm points to God’s promises for the future and to the hope that lies beyond suffering and death. The psalmist points his readers and listeners to a day when all will worship the Lord and all will acknowledge him as King. In his darkest hour, Jesus wanted to give those around him hope for the future, hope beyond death.

→ So, despite what we know is to come as we journey through this Holy Week, there truly is reason to celebrate today! Even though life may not be full of Palm Sundays, we can still rejoice in the knowledge that whenever we turn to God he is ready to welcome us, that he never abandons us and that there is hope beyond this life because of all that we will celebrate together on Easter Day.

..... Today we celebrate with those who have discovered or are beginning to appreciate those truths for themselves. We rejoice with those who today make public professions of their faith and their desire to continue being followers of Jesus. But Palm Sunday reminds us that all of us have the opportunity to welcome Jesus into our lives, just as people welcomed him into the city of Jerusalem all those years ago. May we all be people who cry “Hosanna, Lord save us!” and have the joy of that experience for ourselves which will then bring us hope not only in the good times, but also in the darkness.